

Overcoming Adversity – Sandra Zarazua

Written by Melissa Lachcik

Despite facing setbacks that would break even the toughest person, she has remained focused on accomplishing her goals. Sandra's tenacious spirit has captured the admiration of her peers as well as faculty and staff.

In Fall 2015, the mother of three began attending GED classes to earn her high school equivalency certificate at JJC's downtown City Center Campus. After a 14-year hiatus from school, Sandra was enthusiastic to return. However, on the same day Sandra took her placement test she received a call from her doctor with unimaginable news. Her lab results revealed that she had cancer. This shocking news brought forth a variety emotions and concerns for her health, her family and her schoolwork.

After taking some time to reflect with family, Sandra decided to focus on her classes instead of on illness. She continued to pursue a GED while balancing school and family. However, as part of her treatment, Sandra needed to have two surgeries. Sandra scheduled her surgeries for Thanksgiving Day so that she would not miss any classes. Sandra did not skip a beat.

She even co-enrolled in Global Supply Chain Management training in Summer and Fall 2016 as part of the Integrated Career & Academic Preparation System (ICAPS) program provided through the Department of Adult Education and Literacy. During that time, she simultaneously took classes to earn a college Certificate of Completion along with her GED. The Lockport resident managed all of this while taking care of her health issues and her family.

Libby Budd, GED instructional coordinator at JJC, taught Sandra in Math and Science through several semesters. Libby said, "Sandra is a truly amazing student and I feel very lucky to say I was her teacher. Her drive to learn and to stay focused on the future remained constant through so many hardships. She never took any circumstance in her life as an excuse to give up or put off her education."

Libby explained how Sandra helped her classmates along the way. She said, "Sandra made connections with the other students in class and she would endlessly encourage them, help them understand new concepts, and remind them to take better notes. She formed tightknit study groups within her

classes and as a result pulled many other students forward in the educational process."

After a lot of hard work and sacrifice, Sandra accomplished her goals. In December of 2016, she earned her GED and Global Supply Chain Management Certificate of Completion. She reached an important milestone in her academic career and it was time to celebrate.

Sandra participated in JJC's Graduation Ceremony in May 2017 to receive her Certificate of Completion. Then, to celebrate earning her high school equivalency, she planned to join her GED classmates at JJC's 33rd Annual Adult Education Graduation Ceremony in June 2017.

She gained so much respect from her peers for keeping a positive attitude and displaying a relentless determination while battling health issues and attending school. Sandra said, "I always tell my friends, if I was able to do it, they can do it." The Department of Adult Education & Literacy staff selected Sandra to serve as a student-speaker at graduation. Michelle Lyman, college & career transition specialist at JJC, added, "Her story is an amazing one, filled with hardship and the tenacity to overcome even the greatest challenges."

When graduation day arrived, much to everyone's surprise, Sandra wasn't there. Staff were very concerned about her because they knew how much she was looking forward to it. They later found out that Sandra's health issues had taken a turn for the worse. This time she was airlifted to a hospital where she needed an emergency surgery to save her life. From there, she was transported to an out-of-state university research hospital where she was placed in isolation to undergo experimental treatments. One of the most difficult things was being away from her family for a few months.

Fortunately, Sandra responded well to her medical treatments and is now in remission. When she returned home, one of the first things she did was stop by the Department of Adult Education & Literacy office to return her books from the Spring semester. She also inquired about registering for classes during the Fall 2017 semester.

She met with staff and insisted that she not take a break. Sandra explained that continuing her education gives her a purpose and helps her maintain a positive attitude. Sandra explains, "I am a person that always says, when you want to achieve a goal you can accomplish anything without making excuses."

Since Sandra missed her graduation ceremony and the opportunity to give her speech, adult education staff thought of a great way to honor her. At JJC's September Board of Trustees meeting, Libby read a proclamation to recognize Adult Education and Family Literacy week as September 24-30, 2017, then proudly introduced Sandra. She gave her emotional and heartfelt speech that made an impact on everyone in the room. Sandra also received her certificate from JJC President, Dr. Judy Mitchell. Libby added, "To say that Sandra is an inspirational person is an understatement. Like the ripple a stone makes on the surface of a pond, Sandra's personal dedication to education has spread out and touched so many people."

Currently, Sandra is enrolled at JJC as a full-time student and is pursuing an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) Degree in Management and Supervision. She is also serving as a volunteer tutor in JJC's Adult Volunteer Literacy Program because she wants to give back to other Adult Education students. Michelle added, "Sandra is humble in her efforts and wants her fellow students to believe that if she could do it so can they."

Sandra has already given back so much more to JJC's Adult Education community than she even realizes. She is an inspiration and her story serves as a constant reminder that even though things may seem at their worst, you can rise above!